

December 3, 1999

MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents

FROM: Wilmer S. Cody, Commissioner

Gene Wilhoit, Deputy Commissioner

Randy Kimbrough, Deputy Commissioner

RE: Student achievement

This month the Kentucky Department of Education will appoint a strategy team of department staff, local school district staff, and other citizens to examine differences in student achievement in our state by gender and ethnicity. This group will be asked to form an action plan to include research based instructional strategies and other practices for schools to use to assure that all Kentucky students are provided the opportunity to learn at high levels.

In the commonwealth of Kentucky we have high standards for all students. Our assessment and accountability system is designed to monitor and assist continuous progress in educating all students. As we have analyzed the data through the years 1993 – 1998, we have realized that all demographic groups are scoring higher than in 1993 but, while all students are improving, a gap between the performance of various groups remains. We felt the responsible thing to do was to commission a study on the differences in student performance over time between genders and various ethnic groups.

We commissioned a research project to learn more about how our students are performing. Prior evidence has indicated that difference in achievement between various groups is a problem. Similar trends are found in national and state data by assessments such as ACT and NAEP.

While the achievement gap issue is not unique to Kentucky, we are committed to closing the gap by finding ways to educate all students more effectively. Many of your districts are experiencing similar problems and we thought the information from this report might be helpful to you. We anticipate that the completed work of the strategy team will also be beneficial to schools as we learn to educate all students better.

Enclosed is an abstract of the research project recently completed for the department that assesses race and gender subgroup performance. Three Kentucky professors conducted this project: Doug Smith and Jason Nemes from Western Kentucky University and Dorothy Neff from Transylvania. The report is extensive and will be available soon on our web site. A copy of the 214-page document can be obtained by calling the Office of Assessment and Accountability (502 – 564 – 2256).

We feel sure that the findings from this report will be in the news and we felt it important that you be aware of the information first. If you have any questions or would like to discuss any of these issues further, feel free to contact me at 502 – 564 – 3301 or by e mail (gwilhoit@kde.state.ky.us).

**ASSESSING RACE AND GENDER SUBGROUP PERFORMANCE DIFFERENCES IN KIRIS
ACCOUNTABILITY CYCLE 2 AND CYCLE 3 RESULTS
A Report for the Kentucky Department of Education**

OBSERVATIONS

- All demographic groups scored higher on KIRIS in 1998 than in 1993 but, while all students are improving, a gap between the performance of various groups remains.
- Small academic performance differences by race and gender exist among Kentucky students. The gender gap is decreasing and the achievement gap by race has widened slightly (5% or less in any academic area).
- The overall pattern of differences found that student scores ranked from highest to lowest in order: Caucasian female, Caucasian male, African–American female, African–American male.
- The populations of other represented ethnicities are so small in the state that accurate generalizations about achievement cannot be made for those subgroups. The study was limited to comparing Caucasian and African–American subgroups.
- In the elementary years, KIRIS scores indicated continuous improvement in all subject areas by all subgroups. Very little difference by gender was noted in math and science; small differences by gender were noted in reading and social studies. Small differences by race were consistent in all academic areas through all six years.
- Middle school students have shown a steady state of performance in reading, science and social studies with a slight increase overall in mathematics. There were small differences by both race and gender in reading and social studies and by race in science and mathematics.
- High school students' scores indicated progress over all six years with mathematics and science showing small differences in performance by race. Gender differences were found to be decreasing in all areas but reading.
- Based on ACT and NAEP scores, the achievement gap by race at the national level showed a significant widening since 1988 while Kentucky's gap difference remained relatively stable.
- Kentucky's race gap is not as wide as the nation's.
- School districts with higher concentrations of minority populations (3% or larger) had a larger discrepancy between Caucasian and African–American scores.
- Several schools with very little difference in performance by gender or race were examined more closely. School staffs indicated they thought the differences might be reduced in their schools because all of the student body came from the same socio–economic level regardless of race. The staff members further indicated that African–American role models were evident in their schools, motivational African–American role models were brought into the schools to reinforce the idea that students can achieve their dreams if they work hard. Staff members also indicated that the faculties were committed to curriculum alignment with the state assessment and that cultural diversity is connected to their curriculum. School improvement planning, developing instructional teams to meet students' specific learning needs, parent involvement, increased technology implementation and strong school–wide discipline systems that provide clear guidelines for students were also noted as strong components in these schools.

Kentucky Department Of Education

Initiatives to Assist Schools In Increasing Learning for All Students

The report, Assessing Race And Gender Subgroup Performance Differences In KIRIS, indicates the differences in achievement by race and gender are very small but in Kentucky we believe that any gap is too big. The Kentucky Department of Education and the Kentucky Board of Education are committed to educating all students at high levels and providing schools the tools necessary to close the achievement gap. Some new plans are underway as we further examine this issue and we will continue emphasizing initiatives that were already in place prior to the receipt of this new report.

NEW INITIATIVES

- In December, the Department of Education will appoint a strategy team of educators and citizens to examine the issue of differences in achievement by gender and race and to provide guidance in developing solutions to assist schools in closing existing achievement gaps.
- Kentucky Department of Education staff is going to team up with three to four local districts with the widest achievement gaps and the highest percent of minority populations to do further research on what strategies work as we strive to educate all students to high levels. These findings will be shared in numerous ways with all other schools.

CONTINUING INITIATIVES

- Equity continues as one of the six priorities of the State Board of Education, including examining how to decrease the differences in student achievement by gender and race.
- The Commissioner of Education appointed an Equity Task Force that has been extremely pro-active in continuing to examine student achievement as well as other issues of equity in our schools. Recommendations are continually funneled from this advisory group to educators.
- The redesigned accountability system calls for schools to reduce their percent of students in the lowest performance level of novice before being eligible to collect rewards. This specifically emphasizes the State Board's commitment to educating all students to high levels, regardless of race, gender or disability.
- Two pages of data disaggregated by many categories of subgroups are provided to schools with the state assessment results. These should be used to examine the differences in student performance. Increased training is being provided to school level personnel in using these extensive data.
- Consolidated Planning has a requirement that equity in learning and distribution of resources be a primary consideration in planning for school improvement. State and federal money can be withheld if schools are ignoring providing strong educational strategies to all students.
- The department concentrates assistance in curriculum and instruction to schools considered "high needs" schools through resources from the highly skilled educator program and the Regional Service Center personnel. Equity in educating all students and examining the differences in achievement through data analysis and planning strong instructional strategies are strong components of this work.
- Results from research such as this and resources for addressing the need are provided for schools in many formats such as direct communications, articles in Kentucky Teacher (mailed to every certified educator in the state once a month), best practice sites showcased on Inside Kentucky Schools and broadcast over KET twice a month, reports from progressing schools made to the State Board at every meeting to continually feed us with ideas that seem to be working.